turies their territory stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Peace loving Lithuania had, of dire necessity, become one of the most powerful states in Europe.

During these centuries Lithuania was blessed with a series of eminent rulers: Gediminas, a great warrior and statesman, who founded the capital city of Vilnius; Algirdas, who expanded the eastern border and forced Russian princes to pay tribute; Kestutis "the knight without fear or reproach", who repulsed all the German onslaughts. Finally, the greatest of all, Vytautas the Great, considered one of the ablest statesmen that North-eastern Europe has produced. Vytautas, whose campaigns against the Tartars materially helped to save Europe, and who, as commander-in-chief of the Lithuanian and Polish forces, defeated the Teutonic Knights at the battle of Grunewald-Tannenberg in 1410 and stopped the German advance to the east for five hundred years.

But they were not only warriors these great rulers. They were also astute statesmen. Their eyes were turned to Western Europe, from which they knew they could learn so much. They invited western scholars, architects, traders, artisans, to settle in Lithuania. They maintained relations with the Papacy. Even when they had returned to paganism, they invited Dominican and Franciscan monks to come to Lithuania and try to convert the people if they could. These pagan rulers even built churches for them. When Jews were being more and more persecuted in Western Europe, the Lithuanian rulers asked them to come to Lithuania and live in peace.

These centuries of ceaseless war were Lithuania's finest hour, strange as it may seem. Her cultural progress was immense and she had been welded into a real nation, fully conscious of her identity. Beginning with 1387, Vytautas, himself a Christian, began the systematic Christianization of Lithuania. And in 1388, the bull of Pope Urban VI named Vilnius as the episcopal see of the Catholic Church in Lithuania. It took a long time for all the Lithuanians to be converted to Christianity. But once that was accomplished, they became as tenaciously attached to the Catholic faith as they had been to their pagan religion.

Unhappily, Vytautas died in 1430 leaving no heir, and the fortunes of Lithuania entered a slow decline. The Lithuanians were never a numerous people. Continuing threats from the Germanic west, an ever growing menace from the east, where

the aggressive state of Muscovy was rising, forced Lithuania into a series of alliances with Poland, equally threatened. For a long period these alliances, now stronger, now weaker, but always uneasy, depended mainly on the fact that the Poles always elected the Lithuanian Grand Duke (Lithuania had reverted to a Grand Duchy after the death of Mindaugas) as their king. Thus for nearly two hundred years Poland was ruled by a Lithuanian dynasty, the Jagellonians, descendants of Vytautas' first cousin, Jogaila ("Jagello" in Polish). Polish historians say that this dynasty was the finest Poland ever had.

THE LITHUANIAN - POLISH COMMONWEALTH

Increasing danger from abroad, constant dissension at home, caused many Poles and Lithuanians (though the latter were not enthusiastic) to believe that things might go better if they formed a closer union, a sort of federation. A Lithuanian-Polish (or Polish-Lithuanian, depending on the viewpoint) Commonwealth was formed in 1569 after much wrangling which augured badly for the future. At the time of the federation Lithuanian territory was three times that of Poland, but Poland had a much greater population. Each country retained its own constitution, administration, treasury, and army, having only a parliament and foreign affairs in common.

The Commonwealth was doomed from the start. The last Jagellonian died in 1572 and with him the personal tie was gone. From then on, Lithuanians and Poles, widely different in character, equally proud, always suspicious of one another, despite constant danger from all sides, seemed unable to agree on anything. The Lithuanians who had entered the federation unwillingly, pursued a definite separatist policy during the entire 226 years of the existence of the Commonwealth. The Poles constantly whittled away at Lithuanian power. Rapacious neighbors gladly fommented the discord. If ever a lesson was needed that only in true unity is there strength, this was it. The unhappy Commonwealth was partitioned for the third and last time among Austria, Prussia and Russia. Even the name of Lithuania was erased from the map: the once mighty state was now only "The Northwest Provinces of the Russian Empire".